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Why vitakka doesn't mean 'thinking' in jhana

I shall give you a simile; for it is by means of a simile that some wise people here understand the meaning of what is said.

—THE BUDDHA

Here's one of the most often contested issues in Buddhist meditation: can you be thinking while in jhana? We normally think of jhana as a profound state of higher consciousness; yet the standard formula for first jhana says it is a state with '*vitakka* and *vicara*'. Normally these words mean 'thinking' and 'exploring', and that is how Bhikkhu Bodhi translates them in jhana, too. This has lead many meditators to believe that in the first jhana one can still be thinking. This is a mistake, and here's why.

Actually, right now I'm interested in a somewhat subtle linguistic approach to this question. But I've found that if you use a complex analysis of a problem, some people, understandably enough, don't have time or interest to follow it through; and often we tend to assume that if a complex argument is just a sign of sophistry and lack of real evidence. So first up I'll present the more straightforward reasons why *vitakka/vicara* don't mean thinking in jhana, based on the texts and on experience. Then I'll get into the more subtle question of why this mistake gets made.

For most of this article I'll just mention *vitakka*, and you can assume that the analysis for *vicara* follows similar lines.

Meaning & etymology

Already in the Pali Text Society dictionary we find the combination *vitakka* & *vicara* rendered as ‘initial & sustained application’. This was taken up by Ven Nyanamoli in his translations, but was later removed by Bhikkhu Bodhi as he strove to complete Nyanamoli’s project of effectively finding one English word to translate each significant Pali word.

Etymologically, *vitakka* harks back to a Sanskrit term (*vi-*)*tarka*. This appears in both Pali and Sanskrit literature in the sense of ‘thought’; but more pregnantly also as ‘reflection, reasoning’; in some cases more pejoratively as ‘doubt, speculation’. The Pali Dictionary suggests it is from an Indo-European root, originally meaning ‘twisting, turning’, and related to the English ‘trick’. However, I can’t find any support for this in Indo-European dictionaries; nor can I find it in the Vedas.

In the Suttas

The primary source work is the [Dvedhavitakka Sutta](#) (MN 19). This is where the Buddha talks in most detail about *vitakka* specifically, and describes how he discovered and developed it as part of the ‘right thought’ (*sammāsankappa*) of the eightfold path. Note that the terms *sankappa* and *vitakka* are often, as here, synonyms.

The Buddha describes how he noticed that thinking unwholesome thoughts leads to suffering, while thinking wholesome thoughts leads to happiness. And he further realized that he could think wholesome thoughts nonstop all day and night, which would not lead to anything bad; but by so doing he could not make his mind still in *samādhi*. So by abandoning even wholesome thoughts he was able to enter on the four *jhanas*.

A similar situation is described in [AN 3.101](#). There, the Buddha speaks of a meditator who abandons successively more refined forms of thought, until all that is left are ‘thoughts on the Dhamma’ (*dhammavitakka*). Even these most subtle of thoughts prevent one from realizing the true peace of *samādhi*, so they must be abandoned.

Clearly, then, the right thought of the eightfold path, even thoughts of the

Dhamma itself, must be abandoned before one can enter jhana.

In experience

Let's not even worry about experience of the jhanas; then we'd just end up trying to define what a jhana is. Let me give you a test. Sit quietly, now, for five minutes. Watch your mind, and notice what happens when you think and when you don't think.

Okay, done now? What happened? Well, let me guess: most of the time you were thinking of this or that, but occasionally there were spaces of silence. And those spaces of silence were more peaceful. Even this much, even just a few minutes of sitting quietly, and you can experience the peace of a quiet mind. And yet in jhana you're still thinking? Impossible!

Not to mention jhana, anyone who has been on a meditation retreat will have experienced those blessed moments, sometimes several minutes or longer, when the mind is clear, still, and silent. Not all the hindrances are gone, and not all the jhana factors may be present, yet there is a degree of stillness.

How language evolves

If *vitakka* does not mean thinking, then why did the Buddha use such a misleading word? The answer is simple: it was the best he had. Why this is so, and how such situations can arise, is a fascinating question that takes us into areas of linguistic philosophy, specifically, how we develop words for speaking of refined topics.

My understanding in this area was sparked by Julian Jaynes, who devoted quite some time to this topic in his *magnum opus*, [The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind](#). I don't have the book with me, so this comes from my (usually unreliable) recollections.

The basis of his ideas can be expressed in some simple axioms. The first:

- **Axiom 1:** *All abstract words are derived from more concrete words by way*

of metaphor.

By metaphor here I don't mean, of course, the conscious use of metaphor as a poetic device. I mean the embedded use of metaphor that pervades all language; like, say, the use of 'embedded' in this very sentence.

The idea is that, whether considering the origins of language in history, or the learning of language by an infant, we must begin with what is concrete. We point to the earth and say, 'ugh', then point to the water and say, 'erg'. I can't point to 'solidity' or 'liquidity'. We must gradually learn these abstract concepts based on the more concrete ones.

There is a universal pattern we can discern in this process:

- **Axiom 2:** *Metaphors move from what is better known to what is less known.*

We start with knowledge that is shared. But when one person learns something that others have not, they must draw the others on from what is known towards what is unknown. Jaynes called these things the 'metaphier'—the relatively concrete, well-known thing on which the metaphor is based—and the 'metaphrand'—the relatively abstract, less-known thing that the metaphor is intended to illustrate.

Which leads us to our third axiom:

- **Axiom 3:** *A metaphrand brings something over from the metaphier, and leaves something behind.*

If the basis on which the metaphor is made (the metaphier) has nothing in common with the object of the metaphor (the metaphrand), then there would be no illumination. On the other hand, if they had nothing different, they would be the same thing.

But what is it that is common, and what is lost? Since we are speaking of the movement of language from the coarse to the subtle, we can say that:

- **Axiom 4:** *When words are abstracted, subtle aspects of the metaphier carry over to the metaphrand, while coarse aspects are left behind.*

This is all very abstract, so how about some ‘concrete’ examples. Let’s look closer at ‘earth’.

In English, we have two different words for ‘earth’ (as in the ground, not the planet) and for ‘solidity’. This is such a natural part of our language that we don’t think that it’s anything special.

In Pali, by contrast, the same word, *pathavi*, is used for both ‘earth’ and ‘solidity’. (There are other words for these, too, but I will keep it as simple as I can). In, say, a Vinaya text that discusses digging, it is clear that *pathavi* just means ‘earth’ in the ordinary concrete sense of the dirty stuff in the ground. On the other hand, in a philosophical or meditative text that discusses the contemplation of the ‘earth element’ (*pathavidhātu*), it is clear that a more abstract notion is meant. Parts of the body such as the skin, bones, and hair, are said to be the ‘earth-element’, so clearly this doesn’t mean ‘dirt’. In fact, *pathavi* is given an explicitly abstract definition in the Suttas as ‘hardness, solidity’.

Both languages have a concrete idea of ‘earth’ and an abstract idea of ‘solidity’. And from the Pali it seems obvious that one rose from the other. However, from the English perspective we can’t see that in this case; the metaphorical roots of ‘solidity’ are lost in the mists of time. We no longer feel it as a metaphor. It is just a word that means what it says. In times long past, however, it must have arisen from its own metaphorical roots, which may or may not be the same ‘earth’; in fact, the etymologists say that ‘solid’ is from an ancient Indo-European root **solo-*, originally meaning ‘whole’. Since ‘whole’ is itself an abstract concept it must have come from a still deeper metaphor. Interestingly enough, ‘earth’ is also an Indo-European term, meaning ‘ground’; but neither of these is related to *pathavi*.

So, while the general process is universal, the historical details are arbitrary. Why a language abstracts a certain word and keeps another close to its roots depends on all kinds of random factors. It is not simply that English is a more evolved language than Pali.

Take, for example, the Sanskrit term *trsna*. This means ‘thirst’, and the English word is indeed derived from the same Indo-European root (which originally meant ‘dry’) and keeps the same meaning. On the other hand, in Pali *trsna* is split in two: *tasina* stayed close to its metaphor, and means primarily ‘thirst’, while *tanha* has almost totally lost its metaphorical connections and just means

‘craving’.

Notice, also, that these words can themselves be used as the basis for further metaphors. We can speak of a ‘solid’ character, or an ‘earthy’ character; but these are not the same kind of thing. Similarly, we can have a ‘thirst’ for knowledge, or *tasina* can be used to mean craving, just like *tanha*.

But in all these cases we still feel the metaphor. The words stay close enough to their concrete roots that we know their meaning is being stretched to new forms.

This topic of how language evolves is a fascinating and profound one, and we could take it in all manner of directions. But for now let’s return to our main topic, the Buddha’s description of jhana.

How did the Buddha speak about jhana?

Following the principles sketched out above, what can we say about how the Buddha spoke of jhana?

One thing that seems clear from the historical record is that the Buddha was the first teacher to describe in straightforward, empirical terms the experiences of higher consciousness. Earlier teachings, such as the Upanishads, seemed so overwhelmed by states of transformed consciousness that they had no choice but recourse to a mystical evocation of a divine encounter.

The Buddha, in what must have been a striking innovation, used only simple, empirical terms to describe jhana and other states of higher consciousness. In common with his typical empiricist approach, this means that he used words that remained *as close as possible* to their ordinary meanings. He wanted people to understand these states, to refer to their ordinary consciousness, and to see how that can be developed and transformed to become something wonderful.

So there is this twofold tendency. On the one hand, the Buddha emphasized countless times how powerful and radically transformative the jhanas were. They are the ‘higher mind’, the ‘expanded mind’, the ‘unexcelled mind’, the ‘radiant mind’, the ‘liberated mind’, the ‘light’, the ‘bliss of Awakening’, the ‘end of the world’; they are ‘beyond human principles’, and are ‘distinctions of knowledge and vision worthy of the Noble Ones’.

At the same time he emphasized how attainable they were. If one is dedicated to following the full course of training that he outlined in places such as the Samannaphala Sutta, one could realize a gradual evolution of blissful consciousness eventually culminating in the full release of jhana.

Any understanding of jhana must take full account of both these aspects, neither reducing jhana to an mundane state of easily-attained relaxation, nor making them so exalted and abstract that they seem unreachable.

I should notice, incidentally, that the common expression found in Abhidhamma literature of ‘mundane jhana’ is very misleading. This has nothing to do with the experience of jhana itself. It simply means that jhana, when practiced outside the eightfold path, leads to rebirth.

What do the words in the jhana formula mean?

If we look closely at the terms in the jhana formula, then, we find that they are words that have a more coarse physical or psychological meaning in everyday language. They are common words that everyone can understand, and can relate to their own experience. And in every single case, they clearly have a more subtle, abstract, evolved meaning in the context of jhana. We have moved from the ordinary mind to the ‘higher mind’, and everything about the experience is transformed.

So, for example, the first word in the formula is *viveka*. This normally means physical seclusion; going away from others into the forest or a solitary spot. In jhana, however, it refers to a mental seclusion, where the mind turns away from the senses and withdraws into itself. The Pali texts make this distinction clear, as elsewhere they speak of three kinds of seclusion: physical, mental (i.e. the jhanas), and seclusion from all attachments (Awakening).

The next word in the formula is *kama*. In ordinary language this means the pleasures of life, especially sex, but also food, drink, luxuries, and other pleasures of the senses. In jhana, however, it has a more subtle nuance, referring to the mind that inclines to taking pleasure in any experience through the five senses.

Then there is the word *akusala*. Normally this means ‘unskilful’, as, for example, someone who is no good at a certain craft. One who is *kusala*, on the

other hand, is clever and adroit. In the jhana formula, however, *kusala* includes any tendency of the mind that creates suffering.

Similarly there is the word *dhamma*, which is what *akusala* qualifies. *Dhamma* in ordinary language has a variety of meanings, such as ‘law’, ‘custom’, and so on. In jhana, however, it takes on a far more subtle meaning, that is, any object, quality, or tendency of the mind. The *akusala-dhammas*, or ‘unskilful qualities’, especially refer to the five hindrances which must be abandoned before entering jhana.

And so on. I could go on through the entire jhana formula and show how each word is related to, but abstracted from, its more concrete everyday basis, its ‘metaphier’. But I think that’s enough examples.

So what do *vitakka* & *vicara* mean?

Finally we are ready to return to our original question. Now we can look again at the claim that *vitakka* must mean thinking in jhana, because that’s what it means in everyday discourse. And I trust that this claim now appears a lot less plausible than it might have earlier.

If this is true, then *vitakka* (& *vicara*) are the sole exceptions. Every other term in the jhana formula takes everyday words and transforms them, in what the Buddha emphasizes at every turn is a special, exalted, and refined context. Only *vitakka* is exempt from this, and means exactly the same thing in higher consciousness as it does in lower consciousness.

This argument is not merely implausible, it is totally impossible. Words just don’t do that. And they specially don’t do that in a context like jhana, where the very point of the state of mind is that it is integrated and whole. How can such a coarse, ragged, disturbing thing as ‘thought’ continue, while everything else has become so refined?

Let us consider again our Axiom 4: When words are abstracted, *subtle* aspects of the metaphier carry over to the metaphrand, while *coarse* aspects are left behind.

Sit again for a couple of minutes. This time, don’t be quiet: have a think. Look at what thinking is like. Raise a question: what is the nature of thought? Then stop: be silent: look at the space that reverberates after the words have ended.

When you think, the most obvious aspect, the coarsest aspect, is the verbalizations. But they don't happen alone. There is a kind of lifting of the mind onto an object. This is normally quite subtle, and we don't notice it because we are interested in the words. It becomes more obvious sometimes when you try to think about something, but your mind is not really interested. It's as if you keep moving the mind towards that topic, but nothing much happens. You can also feel it when the words stop. The 'thought' in some sense is there, apart from the verbalizations. It's a subverbal thought, a placing or hovering of the mind in a certain way.

This is what *vitakka* refers to in jhana. This is the subtle aspect of 'thought' that is carried over into jhana, when the coarse aspect, the verbalization, is left behind.

And as with *vitakka*, so with *vicara*. *Vicara* is the 'exploring' of something, and in ordinary language refers to wandering about a place on foot. Psychologically, it normally means a more sustained reflection or examination of a thought, a keeping in mind of the topic that *vitakka* has brought to mind. In jhana, it follows the same process. The coarse verbal reflection is long gone, and in its place is the gentle holding or pressing of the mind with its object.

Early definitions

Unfortunately, there are no further definitions of these terms in the very early strata of texts. However, in the next strata, the late sutta/early Abhidhamma phase, we do have definitions. Our first example comes from a sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya; on text-critical grounds, however, it seems this should be viewed as a proto-Abhidhamma work. *Sankappa* is defined in the Mahacattarisaka Sutta (MN 117) as *takko vitakko saṅkappo appanā byappanā cetaso abhiniropanā vacīsaṅkhāro*. *Vitakka* is included in this definition; and notice the last term, *cetaso abhiniropanā*, which means 'application of the heart'.

The earliest Abhidhamma text, the Vibhanga, gives a similar definition of *vitakka* in the context of jhana: *takko vitakko saṅkappo appanā byappanā cetaso abhiniropanā sammāsaṅkappo*. This text also adds a similar definition of *vicara*: *cāro vicāro anuvicāro upavicāro cittassa anusandhanatā anupekkhanatā*. Notice the last terms here: 'sustained (*anu-* application (*sandh*) of the mind, sustained (equanimous) observation (*ikkh*)'.

Don't be fooled by the fact that these definitions include both ordinary and abstract terms. This is merely a feature of the Abhidhamma definitions in general. They are concerned to show the range of meanings that terms have in different contexts, so that one can understand what terms have the same or different meanings in various sutta passages. It is a means of referring to and defining terminology, and it is not meant to imply that they have the same meaning in all these cases. On the contrary, the overall tendency of these definitions is exactly as we have been describing: they move from the relatively coarse to the relatively subtle.

Those who are proponents of the 'vitakka always means thinking and nothing else' school of interpretation will, of course, reject these texts as inauthentic. And they are quite right; I would not try to argue that these definitions came directly from the Buddha. But that does not mean that the definitions are wrong. They come from a time shortly after the Buddha, likely within a couple of hundred years, when the monks were still immersed in the early Suttas and, crucially, spoke Pali (or something very like it) as a native tongue. They had access to a far more diverse and richer linguistic context than we do, and their opinions must be taken seriously. While on a doctrinal level it is true we can see certain (minor) shifts from the Suttas to the early Abhidhamma, linguistically they belong to the same period, and we would need strong and clear grounds before rejecting their linguistic explanations.

The waywardness of language

Consider once more the process of the gradual abstraction of words from a more concrete metaphorical basis (metaphier) towards a more abstract metaphorical object (metaphrand); from the relatively coarse thing that provides the illumination to the relatively subtle thing that is illuminated. As we saw above, this process is largely arbitrary. Accidents of history, anthropology, and usage will influence which words get used in which sense, and this process will occur in different ways in different languages; and even within the same language.

One of the consequences of this arbitrariness is that there is a certain unpredictability, even obfuscation, in how abstract words are formed. The speaker intended certain aspects of the underlying metaphier to be carried across to the metaphrand, while the listener understood something else. This happens all the time, and is the main reason why, in any higher discipline, experts spend a

lot of time arguing over terminology. We can't simply agree on the meaning of a word by pointing to what it stands for and saying it.

One of the most intriguing ideas that Jaynes introduced was the notion of 'paraphiers' and 'paraphrands'. These are unintended implications or connotations that are carried over from the original idea to the subsequent one. Central to Jaynes' thesis, in fact, is the highly challenging notion that our ability to consciously reflect on ourselves as subjects arose in just such a way.

Leaving aside this intriguingly counter-intuitive idea, Jaynes' essential point is that the paraphiers direct our attention in unexpected ways. And attention creates realities. This is not merely a matter of a kind of poetic allusion or idea. When our minds are drawn towards something—perhaps a new way of seeing or thinking—this creates a new world in our mind, and as we know from our basic Buddhism, such new mental worlds create the world outside.

In the context of jhana, the notion that *vitakka* always means thinking and nothing else creates realities in meditation. It encourages certain kinds of expectations and responses. By doing so it shapes the nature of the meditative experience. This in turn effects speech about meditation, and a whole range of more concrete realities: books, retreat centers, teaching careers, relationships, organizations.

This is another fascinating aspect of Jaynes' theory. The process of abstraction creates powerful mental worlds that then become expressed in material forms, thus returning from the abstract to the concrete. The forms that emerge as expressions of the mind then serve to reinforce and validate the particular mental abstractions that gave rise to them in the first place. Jaynes discusses how this happens in religions through the creation of idols, temples, and the like. When enough people share an idea, they band together to create physical representations of their own mental world; and these physical representations in turn confirm and reinforce the idea.

It is in this way, I believe, that the innocent term *vitakka* has taken on a whole new life. In Pali it had a certain spectrum or flexibility of meaning, such that the Buddha could prod it out of its everyday meaning of 'thought' and tease it into a new meaning, 'application of the mind on to its object in profound meditation'. The English word 'thought', however, lacks such flexibility, and remains stubbornly and exclusively verbal. When used as a metaphor for the less-

knowable ancient word *vitakka*, the unexpected and unintended connotations of thought, its paraphiers, are transferred over.

The process of jhana is, at its heart, nothing more than the deepening stillness of the mind that lets go of all pre-occupations and worries. The Buddha used, as he must, everyday words to point to something that moved beyond the everyday. And it is no small irony that one of the crucial terms in this journey from perplexity to stillness, a word whose less edifying connotations include ‘doubt, speculation, the endless twists and turns of the mind’, has itself provoked such doubts and endless discussions.